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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 005336

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TAGS: PREL PGOV GG RS

SUBJECT: RUSSIA EXPELS THREE GEORGIAN DIPLOMATS IN RESPONSE
TO GEORGIAN ACTIONS

Classified By: Acting DCM Alice G. Wells. Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary. On November 8, Russia declared persona non grata two senior counselors and one counselor in the Georgian Embassy in Moscow, in a tit-for-tat response to Georgia's recall of its Ambassador from Moscow and expulsion of three Russian diplomats. While the MFA issued two harshly critical statements characterizing Georgian actions as a new hostile assault on Russia and criticizing the human rights situation in Tbilisi, Deputy Foreign Minister Yakovenko subsequently agreed with the Ambassador's message that Saakashvili's political concessions could create the environment for de-escalation and a peaceful resolution to the dispute. According to MFA officials, the GOR intends to raise human rights conditions in Georgia during the OSCE Ministerial at the end of the month. Press coverage, most Russian commentators, and Russian liberal activists were critical of the GOG's actions. Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister Nikoloz Vashakidze will meet with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Karasin on November 9 in Moscow. There have been no demonstrators or disturbances at the Georgian Embassy. End summary.

The GOR Reacts Proportionately

¶2. (C) The MFA announced late November 8 that Russia was declaring persona non grata three Georgian diplomats in an "analogous" response to the GOG's expulsion of three Russian diplomats on November 7. Earlier in the day, Georgian Ambassador Irakli Chubinishvili had predicted to us a disproportionate response, but Georgian senior counselor George Zakarashvili confirmed press reports that the GOR action was limited to expelling two senior counselors and a counselor.

¶3. (C) In the immediate aftermath of the GOG's November 7 decision to expel three Russian diplomat, the Ambassador spoke with DFM Yakovenko and encouraged the GOR to help de-escalate the situation. The Ambassador emphasized U.S. efforts in Tbilisi to lower tensions and the serious concerns about rumors of shooting incidents and other potential escalation. Yakovenko replied that the GOR was deeply concerned about the situation and GOG handling of it, and would respond "with appropriate measures." MFA Director Kelin argued separately that Georgia seemed intent on "starting a war again" with Russia, and suggested that Saakashvili was trying to divert attention from internal challenges.

¶4. (U) In advance of its tit-for-tat expulsion of Georgian diplomats, the MFA posted two statements on its website on November 8 strongly critical of Georgia. In the first, the MFA contended that Saakashvili was trying to rationalize the failure of its social-economic policies, the impoverished condition of its citizens, its unwillingness to adopt a

constructive course in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, its authoritarianism, and its contempt for democratic freedoms as evidenced on the streets of Tbilisi. The statement reported that the GOR considered Georgian actions a politically irresponsible provocation and noted that an "adequate response" would be given. It added that Russia would remain true to its international peacekeeping obligations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and would defend Russian citizens. It said that Russia would remain a reliable guarantor of peace and order in the region, in accordance with UN Security Council resolutions and international law. The statement concluded by calling on "those who have direct influence in Tbilisi, to warn the GOG from further destructive steps, fraught with unanticipated consequences."

¶5. (U) The second statement described the state of human rights in Georgia as a "crisis," following the imposition of emergency rule and forceful dispersion of protesters. Excessive use of force, the arrests of opposition and human rights leaders, the closure of independent media outlets, the beating of foreign correspondents, all constituted gross violations. The statement called on the UN, OSCE, and PACE to take action, and argued that GOG actions constituted a threat to regional stability. The statement tracked comments made to us by MFA Regional Conflict Division Chief Aleksey Dvinyanin November 7 that the MFA planned to voice its concern on Georgia's human rights conditions in Russia's official statement during the OSCE Ministerial in Madrid November 29-30.

GOR Will Encourage Peaceful Resolution

¶6. (C) Following the GOR announcement of the expulsions,
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the Ambassador spoke again with DFM Yakovenko and underscored the strong expectation that Russia would encourage a de-escalation of the situation in Tbilisi and a political settlement by peaceful means. The Ambassador alerted Yakovenko to forthcoming GOG announcements to defuse opposition anger, and stressed the tough U.S. message to GOG authorities on the need to avoid violence. Yakovenko acknowledged that the GOG actions would present an opportunity to resolve the internal disputes by democratic means, but stressed again the GOR's concern over the state of human rights. Yakovenko welcomed the Ambassador's assurance that the U.S. would call for an end to the emergency situation and a reopening of media outlets. He concluded that Russia would remain tough in its human rights criticism of Georgia, but would support the goal of de-escalation and a peaceful resolution.

Georgian DFM Visit on Track

¶7. (C) Prior to departing for Tbilisi (and before their meeting at the MFA), Georgian Ambassador Irakli Chubinishvili and DCM Givi Shugarov told us that the GOG expected a "severe" response from the GOR. There had been no consultations with the GOR or forewarning prior to Saakashvili's November 7 speech. They noted that the Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister would arrive in Moscow that evening for a previously-scheduled meeting with Russian DFM Karasin on November 9. The GOR had not canceled the meeting, and had reconfirmed DFM Karasin's availability.

¶8. (C) Chubinishvili was resigned to an extended period of drift in Russian-Georgian relations, which he blamed on Russia's inability to accept Georgian independence and democracy, as well as on an election cycle that exacerbated the political tensions. Whereas two years before, he had had a good relationship with then-Security Secretary Igor Ivanov, now relations were channeled through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; he had virtually no contact with the Presidential Administration. He added that there was really no difference

between the GOR and the "so-called democrats," who purported to love the Georgian people, but hate the Georgian government. The "democrats" still saw Georgia as part of Russia. Chubinishvili said his advice to Saakashvili upon his return to Tbilisi would be to not react, to not overreact, and to lay low until the election cycle had run its course and tempers had cooled.

Press, Commentators Mostly Sharply Critical

¶19. (C) Over the course of the political crisis in Tbilisi, Russian primetime news programs have prominently featured events in Georgia, with many suggesting that the Rose Revolution was at an end and the Saakashvili government on the verge of collapse. The November 6 program, "Odnako," hosted by radical nationalist Mikhail Leontyev, portrayed Saakashvili as a "puppet" of the U.S., with Leontyev claiming that the U.S. had created a totalitarian regime in Georgia, which the Georgian people "can no longer endure." In the wake of the November 7 violence, United Russia Speaker Gryzlov echoed this sentiment, arguing that Saakashvili was operating on instructions of U.S. "special services."

¶10. (C) There was palpable disappointment among Russia's liberal class over the course of events in Tbilisi. Eko Moskvy Editor-in-Chief, Aleksey Venedikov, published an open letter to Saakashvili, endorsed by all Eko journalists, expressing "surprise and condemnation" over the Georgian government's shutting down of the independent Imedi radio and television stations. The letter stated that "democracy ends where the authorities shut up journalists' mouths when they are fulfilling their professional duties." (Note: In response to this letter, Ambassador Chubinishvili said "what can you expect of a station that is controlled by Gazprom.") Grigoriy Yavlinskiy, leader of the Yabloko opposition party, told Eko Moskvy that he was saddened by recent developments in Georgia which did not comply with democratic practice within the rule of law, but added that he could not say who was right or wrong.

All's Quiet at the Embassy

¶11. (U) No demonstrators had appeared at the Georgian Embassy, with media reports attributing a stepped-up security presence to the possibility of protests by the Georgian Diaspora.

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